



County Corner

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The Planning and Zoning Department at Work

Interesting times are ahead for the County Planning and Zoning Department. As dynamic growth and development continue in Flathead County, planning must get ahead and provide the Planning Board, Board of Adjustment and County Commission the tools and recommendations needed to guide sound land use decisions to meet the needs of a changing public. The impacts and results of land use decisions today will become apparent in the future and affect the character of the Flathead and quality of life for future generations. Planning must be able to bridge or vision into that future. Like all other county departments, the Planning and Zoning Department is committed to excellent public service delivery.

Growth and development is not equal between the cities of Columbia Falls, Kalispell and Whitefish and the unincorporated area of the County. About 65 percent of the total population lives within the unincorporated county; the remaining 35 percent live within the cities. Although recent population growth is occurring faster in the cities, the county has seen constant growth in subdivided lands. With this growth come new public expectations and demands for paved roads, un-crowded schools and other public services. People move to the



Flathead to enjoy the natural resources, for the scenic qualities and generally for a better way of life. How to sustain this identity while change occurs can be a difficult task.

The Planning and Zoning Department strives to provide the highest level of planning services to county residents and land owners. The department has 13 diverse and valued professional staff members who work in an environment that encourages creativity, communication and belief in public engagement and process. The department provides three primary functions: 1) current planning, including code enforcement; 2) long range planning; and 3) administration, which includes staff support for the County Commission, Planning Board and Board of Adjustment. Each area or function of the department has unique yet inter-related and cross-over responsibilities.

The Current Planning Team is tasked with reviewing land use applications related to regulations. Subdivision review, zoning administration, code enforcement, lakeshore protection, and flood plain management are principle regulatory programs. During Fiscal Year 2006 the department processed over 2,000 lots, a 50 percent increase over the previous year. In total, 544 land use applications were submitted during the fiscal year. With assistance from the development sector and other public members, the County Subdivision Regulations, which have not seen a total rewrite since the mid 1980's, are in the process of being revised and will begin a public review process in the next couple of months.

The Long Range Planning Team spent most of last fiscal year preparing the Flathead County Growth Policy. The growth policy is a comprehensive plan

policy document, intended to be the foundation to other planning activities. The draft growth policy was released for public review and comments on June 28th and is moving through a 30 day public comment period. The Planning Board is scheduled to hold two public hearings on the draft growth policy on August 8 and 10 and a third public hearing to consider responses to the public comment.

The public interest for new neighborhood plans has increased tremendously over the last year. Once the growth Policy is approved staff will begin to review and evaluate the existing neighborhood plans to ensure consistency and conformity with the growth policy. It is anticipated that neighborhoods and communities will request assistance to begin new neighborhood plans in areas not presently covered by a neighborhood plan.

Planning and Zoning administration covers office management, departmental budget, commissioner requests and other special projects. The front office is a key component of the administration with reception and service to walk-in customers. The Planning Board and Board of Adjustment have served without hesitation to recommend actions to the commission. Typically decisions made by the Board of Adjustment are final actions.

As the public might expect the Planning and Zoning Office is extremely busy and next year doesn't look any different. In addition to new long range plans, staff will continue to develop bicycle paths, process the wide range of zoning applications and subdivision applications and be responsive to the public needs and desires.

Flathead County Planning Zoning Office Director JEFF HARRIS



B.S. Forest Management
M.S. Environmental Planning
Over 25 years of planning experience. Prior to Flathead County, 18 years with Clark County, Nevada in Advanced Planning, Environmental Planning and Parks Planning. Worked in both urban and rural settings for municipal, state and federal agencies.

"The needs of the future take precedent over the demands of the present."

— County Commissioners: Bob Watne, Gary Hall & Joe Brenneman